

Action Research

A Paradigm for Achieving Social Change

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Action research was originally introduced by the late Kurt Lewin, who coined the term and who frequently used it in the realm of intergroup relations. Eight principles of action research based on Lewin's writings, and adopted by leading theorists and practitioners, are elaborated on in this article, accompanied by illustrations of how they have been used in the study reported in this special issue.

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Action research was defined recently by Coghlan and Shani (2005) as follows: "Action research is about undertaking action and studying that action as it takes place" (p. 533). Bradbury and Reason (2003) and Cassell and Johnson (2006) when dealing with action research add the idea that it is best conceived as a family of approaches and practices.

Checkland (1991) and Dickens and Watkins (1999) characterize action research as an iterative cycle of problem identification, diagnosis, planning intervention, and evaluation of the outcomes to estimate what has been achieved and to plan subsequent interventions. Eden and Huxham (1996) perceive action research as "a joint venture between external researchers with members over . . . a matter which is of genuine concern to them" (p. 75). Cullen (1998) states that the most important contribution of action research is that it "opens up and facilitates spaces within which alternative social and organizational paradigms could be nurtured" (p. 1559).

An additional important characteristic is the emancipatory component. Boog (2003) states that "action research is designed to improve the researched subjects' capacities to solve problems . . . increase their chances for self-determination and to have more influence on the functioning and decision making processes of organizations" (p. 426).

Action research originally sought the solution of social problems (Lewin, 1946/1948). In Lewin's article, in which he first elaborated on the action research paradigm, he referred to it as an intervention that dealt with the improvement of intergroup relations.

According to Reason and Bradbury's (2001) definition, action research is both a methodology and an ideology. As a methodology, it prescribes ways to collect and interpret data. As an ideology, it is rooted in the democratic philosophy of promoting individual welfare in a humanistic way. Epistemologically, there are differences between what we term *normal science* and *action research*. Normal science (the positivistic approach) (Argyris, 1980) strives to formulate general laws to predict behavior. Research that is based on the positivistic approach assumes that the social world can be understood based on objective measurement and quantification of its phenomena. This kind of research generally formulates hypotheses; data are then gathered to confirm or refute the hypotheses. The data are generally gathered using standardized instruments. The relations between researchers and "participants" are expected to remain neutral and objective. Questions of power relations, values, and ideologies of the two parties (researchers and participants) are not raised, as the division of labor between the "expert" and the participant in the research study is taken for granted.

The literature concerning action research as a legitimate social science methodology has flourished. Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* devotes a full chapter (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) to the various aspects of action research. And the culmination of this trend is the recent publication *Handbook of Action Research* (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Reason and Bradbury (2001) also serve as the editors of a journal that is devoted in its entirety to action research philosophy, methodology, and studies.

In general, researchers using a traditional positivistic approach in the social sciences were not typically interested in developing interventions, believing that this activity may be contrary to the scientific intent of the study (Sussman & Evered, 1978). Action research, in contrast, was introduced to contain both components: the scientific and systematic accumulation of data as well as the development of interventions that represent practical solutions to problems experienced by people and their communities.

Action Research Principles and Their Application to the Study

Kurt Lewin (1946/1948) first elaborated on the paradigm of action research in his article on "action research and minority problems." This

article was written as part of an endeavor to improve intergroup relations in several American communities. Lewin, who was called on to assist practitioners in assessing the outcomes of their interventions in these communities, realized that these practitioners would have to devise a different method of practice. In this regard, he observed,

The research needed for social practice can best be characterized as research for social management, or social engineering. It is a type of action research, comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action, and research leading to social action. (p. 202)

Since Lewin's (1943-1944/1951, 1947) initial writings on the subject, numerous articles that characterize and discuss the action research paradigm appeared often accompanied by action research case studies (Bargal, Gold, & Lewin, 1992). Conceptual and comprehensive articles on action research can be found in Peters and Robinson (1984), Sussman and Evered (1978), Elden and Chisholm (1993), Dickens and Watkins (1999), and Cassell and Johnson (2006).

The following is a summary of action research principles based on Lewin's writings (Bargal, 2006) that are consistent with the works of the leading theorists cited earlier.

Action Research Principles

1. Action research combines a systematic study, sometimes experimental, of a social problem as well as the endeavors to solve it.
2. Action research includes a spiral process of data collection to determine goals, action to implement goals, and assessment of the results of the intervention.
3. Action research requires feedback of the results of intervention to all parties involved in the research.
4. Action research implies continuous cooperation between researchers and practitioners.
5. Action research relies on the principles of group dynamics and is anchored in its change phases. The phases are unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Decision making is mutual and is carried out in a public way.
6. Action research takes into account issues of values, objectives, and power needs of the parties involved.
7. Action research serves to create knowledge, to formulate principles of intervention, and to develop instruments for selection, intervention, and training.
8. Within the framework of action research, there is an emphasis on the recruitment, training, and support of the change agents.

We will now elaborate on each of the eight principles mentioned earlier. Regarding each of these principles, we will point out how the principle was applied to our project.

1. Action research combines a systematic study, sometimes experimental, of a social problem as well as the endeavors to solve it.

Contrary to scientific models, in which the main task is to explore and understand the social problem, in action research the main goal is to understand the problem to execute interventions for its solution. In the study stage of the problem, the action researcher may offer methodologies that are experimental in nature (Cassell & Johnson, 2006; Chein, Cook, & Harding, 1948). In experimental designs of action research, selection procedures are used to match the experimental and control/comparison groups. However, the main purpose of data collection is to understand the social problem to respond appropriately toward its solution. Theory is an important component that guides the change process. We are reminded here of Lewin's (1943-1944/1951) dictum: "There is nothing so practical as a good theory" (p. 169).

The problem at the focus of our action research was the creation of an educational intervention within two high schools, to reduce intergroup conflicts and tensions, and to raise the awareness of their students and staff about these issues to prevent their manifestations. In the past, interventions to reduce intergroup conflicts and tensions within high schools consisted mainly of students engaging in short-term encounters. The interventions often relied on contact theory (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Contact theory has recently been confirmed empirically (Pettigrew, 1998; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). According to this theory, the following conditions may strongly contribute toward the improvement of intergroup relations between people who represent different ethnic groups: (a) contact in an intimate, pleasant, and rewarding organizational climate; (b) an equal status between the groups; (c) the existence of cooperative, superordinate goals (Sherif, 1958), which participants in the groups work together to accomplish; and (d) a strong institutional support for the program.

Unlike the short-term small-group programs that are typical of most educational interventions, our project has sought to create an ongoing organizational culture that will foster an atmosphere of tolerance for differences as well as focus on the solution of conflicts in a peaceful and cooperative way.

2. Action research includes a spiral process of data collection to determine goals, action to implement goals, and assessment of the results of the intervention.

In contrast to many scientific research designs that are usually of a “one shot” nature (apart from longitudinal studies), action research designs are, as a rule, long-range interventions. Action research has been conceived of as a problem-solving process that occurs in ongoing, changing environments that are the targets of the intervention. Theoretically, there is no end to the intervention because problems that need to be addressed arise all the time. The guiding principle of action research, which rests on a problem-solving sequence, is that the process is dynamic and changing, so that the project is also constantly changing.

The notion of a spiral process is embodied in our intervention, which has been implemented for 4 consecutive years. Each year, the intervention has been modified so that it reflects the insights gained by the project directors, facilitators, and participants. The empirical data are derived from questionnaires, interviews, and focus group dialogues, which has led to continuous improvement and adaptation of the program to the needs of the actors and parties involved.

3. Action research demands feedback, regarding the results of the intervention, to all parties involved in the research.

Feedback is a central mechanism of learning that draws on the concept of an open system (Katz & Kahn, 1978). The term carries two principal meanings: as a means of correction and for choosing action directions while the system is in motion. With regard to corrections, when a system is in action, the project may deviate from the original course. In the literature on individual therapy that examines changes occurring on a system level, we find references to feedback mechanisms (see Rogers, 1957; Watzlawick, 1978).

In the organizational change literature, the feedback measure, according to Burke (2002), can be powerful because “it is based on data, it involves organization members directly; and it provides information about what to change and in which priority” (p. 30). The emphasis here is on the active role played by all parties in the research enterprise—including clients and participants who are, as a rule, excluded from power positions and do not have access to the information available to those in charge of the intervention.

4. Action research implies continuous cooperation between researchers and practitioners.

In the conventional scientific model of research, the researcher is the director of the operation. She or he is typically the only one familiar with the research hypotheses, procedures for selecting participants, and so forth.

In action research, in contrast, practitioners are equal partners in all the decisions arrived at in the research. The underlying principle of cooperation is that the participants should be responsible for decisions that affect their lives and who need, therefore, to understand the rationale underlying the intervention. Being equal partners in the research project, and knowing the content and rationale for decisions, enables the participants to maintain a high level of motivation to participate.

There are several ways in which this cooperation was attained in our project. One was the creation of a policy committee comprising researchers, school personnel, and students. This committee met first in the year before the project began to create the program manual. It did not yet include students, as they were to be drawn from the students who would participate when the project began. Once the project was underway, this committee met once or twice a month to review the program's progress and to determine project modifications.

On an annual basis, the policy committee was joined by the principals and superintendents who reviewed program data, supplied monetary resources to continue the program, and made suggestions for the next iteration of the program. In addition, the program staff met regularly with the principals to inform them of program progress and to obtain their inputs. Finally, the school administrators (who were assistant principals) also reported regularly regarding the program to the principals. In addition, program staff facilitators and junior facilitators (4th-year students who had been participants the year before) met weekly to debrief on the previous session and to make plans for the next session.

5. The small group plays a central role in decision making and in achieving change in people.

In action research, the small group serves as the most important vehicle for democratic decision making. The small group is also one of the most effective means to achieve change in people (Coch & French, 1948; DeLucia-Waak & Kalodner, 2005; Forsyth, 1990; Lieberman, 1980; Magen & Mangiardi, 2005).

Bargal and Bar (1992) have also reported on action research designed to improve intergroup relations between Arab and Jewish youth in Israel using small groups.

Some of the group activities were conducted in a group with all students present. Others were conducted in small groups, in which the larger group was divided into groups of five to six students. The large group was used to

introduce activities, to present educational material such as short lectures, and to allow participants to share with all the other students what happened in the small group. Small groups were used to encourage discussion of personal material and to allow all students in the small group to speak within the allocated time. At times, small groups comprised students of similar identities (such as of the same gender or ethnic background) so that those students with that status could share their experiences with others of similar backgrounds. In this latter circumstance, the subsequent large group discussion allowed students to learn the reactions to the issue discussed by students of different backgrounds.

6. Action research takes into account issues of values, objectives, and power needs of the parties involved.

Because action research is a collaborative enterprise comprising several parties, it implies that each party will base its actions on its own sets of priorities and values. For example, in an intervention such as ours that takes place within two high schools, there are several parties: the principals, the teachers, the students of the school, the students participating in the project, and the facilitators. Each of these parties, some of whom even did not take an active role in the project, carries its own image of how to educate for intergroup tolerance. For example, generally, the teachers will tend to believe that a course-like structure is sufficient to turn students into culturally sensitive people. The facilitators, inspired by the project directors, know that imparting knowledge and information regarding prejudice and intolerance is not enough to affect attitudes and behavior. The difference between the parties' conception regarding what is the appropriate intervention may create conflicts and disagreements. The only way for the research project to implement its goals is to deal openly with conflicts that arise. An ongoing process of managing and solving these conflicts guarantees that the project will proceed as planned.

7. Action research serves to create knowledge, to formulate principles of intervention, and to develop instruments for evaluation.

In an action research project, it is expected that two sources of knowledge will be generated. The first is data, such as that collected in every scientific study. It is usually quantitative in nature. The second is "actionable knowledge." Actionable knowledge (Argyris, 1993) is knowledge relevant for use in the organizational setting where the intervention of the action

research takes place. As has been expressed in this regard by Argyris (1997), "action research at its core is normative and prescriptive" (p. 812). The prescriptive facet of our project is represented by the manual used by the facilitators (see Garvin's article in this issue).

In our project, we collected data through structured instruments administered at the first and last sessions. We also collected qualitative data through (a) narratives of every group session that included the observers' impressions of such things as the emotional climate at the session and (b) qualitative interviews of students as the program was ending. The former set of data indicated how students viewed their identities as well as those of others, how they viewed the conditions of their society with reference to intergroup relations, how they viewed the intergroup conditions in their schools, and how they saw their own ability to create change. The latter sets of data indicated how students react to various kinds of programmatic stimuli presented to enable them to reflect on their own beliefs and attitudes, what they became aware of with respect to the beliefs and attitudes of others, what stimuli produced this awareness, what programmatic events enhanced their awareness of conditions in their schools and communities, and how actions of group facilitators affected them (see Spencer et al. in this issue).

8. Within the framework of action research, there is an emphasis on recruitment, training, development, and support of the change agents (the facilitators).

The main objective of action research is to bring about change in human organizations and communities and in particular in the attitudes and behavior of their members. We are reminded of Lewin's (1946/1948, p. 211) view regarding the centrality and importance of the facilitators as change agents.

Lewin portrayed this as a triangle: Training is the first component, and the other two axes are intervention and research. In contrast to other approaches to science, the role of trainers/facilitators goes beyond collecting data. They should have a deep understanding of the participants in the intervention and guide them toward the achievement of their goals. Facilitators who worked with the groups of students in each high school in our project were carefully selected. To assist them in their role, they were provided with ongoing training and close supervision. The training focused on their understanding of the objectives of the intervention and on their becoming acquainted with the manual with its exercises and minilectures. Their supervision was aimed at supporting them in delivering the intervention as well as in assisting them to deal with their own attitudes in the service of leading the students toward an understanding of the diversity of opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of others.

Conclusion

Action research is about a paradigm of research that deals with the creation of change in human systems. The change processes and products are evaluated while the systems are in the process of functioning in the service of their stakeholders. Action research is about applying theory generated in the social and behavioral sciences, but it is also concurrently a careful construction of the situation that is the target of research and change. It is not a mechanical act of classifying the situation as a class of behavior not based on authentic and relevant data. It is a set of systematic research and intervention activities that emphasizes reflection “in action” and “on action” (Leitch & Day, 2000; Schon, 1983).

It combines theory and practice in an effective way, taking into account the relative advantage of each (Weick, 2003). Action research is also about a different model of relations between actors and parties who participate in it. It is open, egalitarian, and just. And last, action research embodies a distinct ideology: It is humanistic, it emphasizes the empowerment of its participants, and it is critical (Boog, 2003; Peters & Robinson, 1984). Lewin, when coining the paradigm of action research, meant to anchor it in the two realms. It is based on knowledge created through academic research and knowledge created while intervening in practice. Schon’s (1983) “reflection in action” and Argyris’s (1993) “actionable knowledge” are direct successors of Lewin’s paradigm of action research. Whereas academic research aspires to be value free and objective, Argyris (1997) claimed that “at its core [action research] is normative and prescriptive” (p. 812).

We are again reminded of Reason and Bradbury’s (2001) definition of action research, which we cited earlier and which we feel conveys sharply the meaning of our project:

[Action research] seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (p. 1)

Our project seeks to make several contributions to action research traditions. We applied the action research paradigm to help solve a serious contemporary problem. We used the paradigm in conjunction with contemporary schools operating under all the opportunities and constraints found in public educational systems today. We further wished to demonstrate the ability of contemporary adolescents to participate in and benefit from action research.

We wished to contribute to knowledge about the university and the public secondary school system as partners in action research. And finally, and most important for this journal, we wished to have action research demonstrated as an important model for adding to our knowledge of small group theory and practice.

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